Antonio Sant'Elia's novel

Bragato, Stefano

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110575361

Stefano Bragato

Antonio Sant'Elia's Novel

Gianni Biondillo: *Come sugli alberi le foglie*. Milan: Guanda, 2016. 352 pp. ISBN 978-88-235-1610-6. € 18,50.

Narratives of the so-called 'heroic period' of Futurism have been strongly influenced by the ways in which they were depicted by its protagonists. F. T. Marinetti's accounts in *Futurismo e fascismo* (1924) and *Marinetti e il futurismo* (1929), in newspaper articles and the posthumously published memoirs, *La grande Milano tradizionale e futurista – Una sensibilità nata in Egitto* (The Great Traditional and Futurist Milan – An Italian Sensibility Born in Egypt, 1969), persistently echo in the ears of Futurism scholars. Now we have the chance to read a different version of these chapters of Futurist mythology. The historical novel *Come sugli alberi le foglie* (Like Leaves on the Trees) by the Italian author (and architect) Gianni Biondillo (1966–) narrates the life of the Futurist architect Antonio Sant'Elia (1888–1916), from his childhood in Como to his death on the battlefields of the Great War. The real protagonist of the text, however, is the Futurist movement in its early phase, seen through the eyes of Sant'Elia. Thus, we witness the birth and the development of Marinetti's avant-garde movement, we hear its main protagonists (Marinetti, Boccioni, Russolo, Carrà, etc.) talking, we see them working, fighting, dying in the First World War, and we experience the excited intellectual climate in early twentieth-century Milan. The novel is based on accurate research, and Biondillo handles a range of different sources, from primary texts to critical explorations, which are neatly woven together here and made to dialogue with each other. The novel's structure is carefully balanced and the narrative unfolds on two different temporal layers that interrelate the pre-war period (1899–1914) with the years of the Great War (1915–1916).

Sant'Elia's aspirations for a better Italy and the ambitions of other young Milanese intellectuals form a common thread in the pre-war sections of the novel. Initially, we witness Sant'Elia's fascination for the technological magnificence of Milan, especially when – arriving from the small city of Como – he visits the International World's Fair in Milan in 1906, which focussed on the theme of transportation. Milan, 'la città che sale' (the rising city), is one of the silent heroes of the text. At the Brera Academy of Fine Arts, Sant'Elia meets many young artists (Carlo Erba, Leonardo Dudreville, Achille Funi, etc.), who plot the future of Italian culture, as well as Carlo Carrà who introduces him to Marinetti and eases his way into the Futurist ranks. In Milan, Sant'Elia also meets some of

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110575361-018

the most famous personalities of those years, including Giovanni Verga, Emilio Salgari, Maria Montessori and Antonio Gramsci.

Milan is also the background to a number of well-known Futurist episodes portrayed by Biondillo in a fictional manner. They include Marinetti's car accident on 15 October 1908, which he transfigured in the founding manifesto of Futurism (pp. 62–63), the first concert of Russolo's *intonarumori* at the Teatro Dal Verme on 21 April 1914 (pp. 177–81), the interventionist demonstration at the same theatre on 15 September 1914, when the Futurists tore an Austrian flag to pieces and threw the fragments into the auditorium, and the fight in the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele the following day, almost a replica of Boccioni's painting *Rissa in galleria* (Fight in the Arcade, 1910). Another key episode that features prominently in Futurist mythology and is amusingly recounted by Biondillo is the 'punitive action' at the Giubbe Rosse Cafè in Florence on 30 June 1910, when Marinetti & Co. started a scuffle with Soffici (who had just criticized in *La voce* a painting by Boccioni), Papini and Prezzolini, thus laying the foundations of the collaboration between the Milanese and the Florentine groups:

> The stranger gets in front of the coffee table. He stands upright. The four men look at him curiously and disdainfully.
>
> 'Are you Ardengo Soffici?' he asks.
>
> The one sitting raises his hand over his head and puts his sparse wisps of hair in order. 'I am', he answers.
>
> 'And I am Umberto Boccioni', says the one standing.
>
> Then he slaps him right into the face with his open hand. Soffici staggers. He leans on the coffee table and makes it tip over. He clumsily raises from his chair, like a wild buffalo, his walking stick in his hand. In a flutter of excitement he hits Papini.
>
> 'Geez!' swears the curly-haired one. 'My glasses!' He's cowering down on all fours, looking for his spectacles on the ground.
>
> Rosso is astounded. Prezzolini even amused. Now a fight breaks loose, a general uproar is unleashed amidst the knocked-over tables and chairs, flying trays, broken glasses, punches and blows. The bystanders, everyone else, step back, terrified. There is even a lady who faints theatrically, and there is somebody who, like in a playscript, shouts: 'The smelling salts! Quick, get my smelling salts!' [...]. This is physical, corporeal poetry.[1]

1 "Lo sconosciuto si piazza davanti al tavolino. In piedi e impettito. I quattro lo guardano curiosi e sufficienti. / 'È lei Ardengo Soffici?' chiede. / Quello seduto si passa una mano sulla testa e mette in ordine i radi capelli. 'Sono io' risponde. / 'E io sono Umberto Boccioni' dice quello in piedi. / Subito dopo gli stampa un ceffone a mano aperta sul volto. Soffici barcolla. Appoggia una mano sul tavolino, che si ribalta a terra. S'alza sgraziato dalla sedia, come un bufalo imbizzarrito, bastone da passeggio alla mano. Nella concitazione urta Papini. / 'Madonna maiala' bestemmia il riccioluto. 'Gli occhiali!' S'acquatta a quattro zampe, cercando

Throughout his novel, Biondillo implicitly quotes a number of Futurist works, including Carrà's *I funerali dell'anarchico Galli* (The Funeral of the Anarchist Galli, 1911), Russolo's *La musica* (Music, 1911) and Palazzeschi's poem *E lasciatemi divertire* (And Let Me Have My Fun, 1910). The Futurists' first war experience in 1915, when they enrolled in the Lombard Battalion of Volunteer Cyclists and Automobilists, is narrated in an exuberant and festive tone. Biondillo focusses on the excitement of these young artists when confronted with a war they had dreamt of for years, and on their fundamentally aesthetic approach towards it. These artists were fascinated by the colours, sounds and sights of battle, and continuously pondered on how they might translate their experiences into poetry and visual art.

Biondillo draws in his account on a large number of primary sources, including the Futurists' diaries and letters, Marinetti's report in the newspaper article "Quinte e scene della campagna del Battaglione Lombardo Volontari Ciclisti sul Lago di Garda e sull'Altissimo" (Backstage and Wings of the Campaign of the Lombard Battalion of Volunteer Cyclists on Garda Lake and Mount Altissimo, 1916), and his Words-in-Freedom compositions "Battaglia a 9 piani" (Nine-storey Battle, 1916) and "Con Boccioni a Dosso Casina" (With Boccioni on the Casina Ridge, 1916). In the novel, they resurface in episodes such as Boccioni's motorbike ride from Milan to his base camp in Malcesine, or in a scene where he catches a cold and is afraid that his coughing might reveal the volunteers' position during a night expedition. Biondillo also portrays the pains and fears of the life in the trenches, including the volunteers' uneasiness when they see their corporal Augusto Colombo wounded, or Boccioni's worrying about his mother in the case of him dying in battle (recorded in his letters from the front to Vico Baer). The Futurists in this novel often speak the same words as recorded in their writings, and Biondillo even tries his hand at composing some prose in Futurist Word-in-Freedom style:

> Milan = melancholy + boredom. It was as if the city did not vibrate anymore. Also, with Armida things were not going well. Everything annoyed and bored him [...]. In the street, two women told him that nobody was left in the armoury, that the battalion had left for the frontline at dawn. Umberto is seized with panic and despair.

---

gli occhiali caduti a terra. / Rosso è incredulo. Prezzolini persino divertito. Ormai è una rissa, un parapiglia generale, fra le tavole e seggiole per terra, vassoi che volano, bicchieri infranti, mulinare di pugni e di bastonate. Gli astanti, tutti gli altri, si allontanano terrorizzati. C'è pure una dama che sviene, scenografica, e c'è, come da copione, chi urla: 'I sali, presto, i sali'. [...] Questa è poesia fisica, corporale." (pp. 125–26; all translations are mine).

> Anger + pain + desperation. Angerpaindesperation. Pain, Umberto thinks, pain, he thinks. Anger, desperation. In order to find a solution, Umberto ponders, wanders like a stray dog, screams in the dark street. Think, think. No desperation. NO! Let's find a means of transport. I can reach them. I must.
>
> He persuaded a mechanic on the country road to give him a motorbike, promising a money reward when possible [...].
>
> Long live Italy. Rumble of the engine + beat of the street = 55 km to Malcesine.[2]

Another example of Biondillo's use of primary sources is the Futurists' discussion of the sounds of the war, which draws on a number of original Futurist texts: a letter by Boccioni to Baer, a section of Marinetti's notebooks, the visual poem "Battaglia a 9 piani", and Russolo's article "Il rumore nella guerra moderna" (Noise in Modern Warfare, 1916):[3]

> When the volunteers arrived at a forest some 950 meters high up, they were kept waiting, as a reserve. Russolo was also there. Bullets flew over their heads, from one end of the lake to the other. 149 mm bullets flying for eight kilometres, weighing forty kilograms each, one shot every three minutes. From the point of departure to the target, twenty-seven seconds of noise. And the echo, from the valley, five seconds later.
>
> 'We should reconsider my theory of noise', [Russolo] said to his companions.
>
> 'Do you want to bring a cannon to the theatre?', asked Antonio, joking.
>
> Russolo listened, entranced, to the bombardment. 'The rhythm, can you hear it? The hisses, the explosions. There is a precise pace, a frequency' [...].
>
> It was not uncommon that some volunteer listened to this group of madmen. They did not understand much of their abstruse talk, but were enthralled by how they managed to transform such a serious situation in something fascinating.[4] In that very moment, an

2 "Milano = Malinconia + Noia. Era come se la città non fremesse più. E anche con Armida le cose non andavano. Tutto gli dava fastidio, tutto lo tediava [...]. Per la strada due donne del paese gli dissero che non c'era nessuno in polveriera, che il battaglione era partito per il fronte all'alba. Ad Umberto scoppiò uno sconforto panico. / Rabbia + dolore + disperazione. Rabbiadoloredisperazione. Dolore, pensa Umberto, dolore, pensa. Rabbia, disperazione. Trovare soluzione, ragiona Umberto, girare come un cane randagio, urlare nella notte per strada. Ragiona, ragiona. No disperazione. NO! Trovare mezzo di trasporto. Si può raggiungerli. Si deve. / Convinse un meccanico sulla strada provinciale a dargli una motocicletta, promettendogli un vaglia di ricompensa appena possibile [...]. W l'Italia. Rombo del motore + Rullio della strada = 55 km a Malcesine." (pp. 28–29). Boccioni reports this episode in his war diaries in Boccioni: *Taccuini futuristi* pp. 194–195.

3 See Boccioni: *Gli scritti editi e inediti*, p. 197; Marinetti: *Taccuini 1915–1921*, p. 16; Russolo: "Il rumore nella guerra moderna."

4 Selena Daly in "Futurist War Noises: Confronting and Coping with the First World War" has noted how the Futurists' transfiguration of war noises worked for them as a strategy to cope with the hardship of the war environment.

enemy reconnaissance plane passed by. 'And this one? Can you hear it?' Russolo asked enthusiastically [...].

'It is three thousand metres high', said Sant'Elia.

'It is farther than its own sound', replied Russolo.

'The sound is the dynamic reminder of a plane flying by', said Boccioni. 'It's continuity in space'.

'Do you understand them?' asked a corporal?

'Not a word', the other answered softly.[5]

This positive and comradely climate suddenly changes when the narration moves on to 1916. After the demobilization of their battalion, the Futurists were sent to different war fronts, where they could no longer feel part of a cohesive group of friends that went to war together. Rather, they became ordinary soldiers who had to cope with the hardship of everyday life in the trenches. Sant'Elia, who was sent to the Carso plain, began to see the war as a tragic massacre, a struggle of political and economical interests that endangered the lives of common people, who did not even understand the purpose behind the war. In these sections of the novel, the atmosphere gets dark, tragic and pessimistic: Biondillo conjures up the exhausting doldrums of trench routine, the dirt, the cold, the hunger, the precariousness, the fear of the enemy and of the superiors, etc. A sentence pronounced by Boccioni a few days before his death on 17 August 1916 condenses all of these feelings: "War was strain, sweat, mud and shit. Not the sole cleanser of the world."[6] A few days earlier, Sant'Elia reflects on his pending death and blames Marinetti for it, since the Futurist leader lied to all of them when he promoted the war as an entirely positive event (p. 143). The regular shift between contrasting atmospheres (bright, optimistic, exuberant the first;

5 "Giunti in un bosco a quota 950 i volontari vennero messi in attesa, di riserva. C'era pure Russolo. Il piombo volava sulle loro teste da sponda a sponda del lago. Otto chilometri di volo di proiettili da 149mm, quaranta chilogrammi di peso per proiettile, un colpo ogni tre minuti. Dalla partenza al bersaglio ventisette secondi di rombo. E l'eco, dalla valle, cinque secondi dopo. / 'Dovremmo rivedere le mie teorie rumoriste' disse ai presenti. / 'Vuoi portarti un cannone in teatro?' chiese Antonio, scherzoso. / Russolo ascoltava estasiato il bombardamento. 'Il ritmo, lo sentite? I sibili, la deflagrazione. C'è un passo preciso, una cadenza' [...]. / Non era raro che qualche volontario restasse ad ascoltare questo gruppo di matti. Non capivano molto dei loro discorsi astrusi, ma restavano affascinati da come riuscissero a trasfigurare una situazione così greve in qualcosa di affascinante [...]. Il quel mentre passò un aereo di ricognizione nemico. 'E questo? Lo sentite?' chiese entusiasta Russolo [...]. / 'Sarà a tremila metri' disse Sant'Elia. / 'Lui è più lontano del suo stesso suono' replicò Russolo. / 'Il suono è il ricordo dinamico dell'aereo in volo' riprese Boccioni. 'La sua continuità nello spazio'. / 'Tu li capisci?' chiese un caporale. / 'Neppure una parola' rispose l'altro, sottovoce." (p. 35).

6 "La guerra era fatica, sudore, fango e merda. Altro che igiene del mondo."(p. 159).

gloomy and deadly the second) is one of the most engaging aspects of this book because, on the one side, it endows the narration with a very vivid rhythm, and on the other it embodies the very coexistence of hope and disillusionment, optimism and loss that pervaded Sant'Elia and his Futurist friends.

In addition to telling Sant'Elia's life story, the novel touches upon the war experiences of other famous intellectuals of the time, including the irredentists Cesare Battisti and Fabio Filzi, the writers Robert Musil, Emilio Lussu and Carlo Emilio Gadda,[7] and even Benito Mussolini before becoming Italy's Duce. As these names indicate, *Come sugli alberi le foglie* is not just a biography of the architect Sant'Elia, but an epic novel, the story of a generation of young intellectuals who faced the deadliest of wars with fear, hope and disenchantment.

The title of the novel alludes to Giuseppe Ungaretti's poem *Soldati* (Soldiers, 1918),[8] suggesting a reading that focusses on the calamities of warfare and on the horrific experience of being a soldier. I believe, however, that the ultimate meaning of this text does not lie in the representation of the tragedy of war, but in the way it depicts a generation disillusioned with a war they had glorified and longed for in their writings, soirées and public actions. For Sant'Elia, Boccioni and their comrades, the war was more than an appalling experience: it was an event that silenced their initial enthusiasm, betrayed their hopes for a better Italy and dashed their belief in a better world. The Great War did not turn out to be an instrument for subverting the present order, as they had thought, but rather the opposite – a means to perpetuate the power of the old élites.

Scholars of Futurism are likely to enjoy this well-written book. I would not hesitate to also recommend it as secondary reading in courses on Futurism, the First World War and Italian early twentieth-century cultural history.

Bibliography

Boccioni, Umberto: *Gli scritti editi e inediti*. A cura di Zeno Birolli. Milano: Feltrinelli, 1971.
Boccioni, Umberto: *Taccuini futuristi*. Rome: Mancosu, 2004.
Daly, Selena: "Futurist War Noises: Confronting and Coping with the First World War." *California Italian Studies* 4:1 (2014): 1–16.
Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso: "Battaglia a 9 piani." *Vela latina* 4:1 (8 January 1916): 1.

7 The reader will find the section on Gadda particularly entertaining, as Biondillo reports his thoughts by making use of the peculiarly expressionistic style of his novels.
8 "Si sta come / d'autunno / sugli alberi / le foglie." (We are / as in autumn / the leaves / on a tree). Ungaretti: *Vita d'un uomo: Tutte le poesie*, p. 125.

Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso: "Con Boccioni a Dosso Casina." *L'Italia futurista* 1:6 (25 August 1916): 3.
Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso: "Quinte e scene della campagna del Battaglione Lombardo Volontari Ciclisti sul lago di Garda e sull'Altissimo: Annotazioni episodiche." *Gazzetta dello sport*, 31 January and 7 February 1916.
Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso: *Taccuini 1915–1921*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1987.
Russolo, Luigi : "Il rumore nella guerra moderna." *Gli avvenimenti* 2:1–2 (2–9 January 1916): 14–16.
Ungaretti, Giuseppe: *Vita d'un uomo: Tutte le poesie*. A cura di Carlo Ossola. Milano: Mondadori, 2009.